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Marital Matters

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Marital Matters

Abstract

Between 2006-2009, Rowan Cahill published a number of commentaries relating to the Anzac tradition, and to the Australian martial tradition generally, on the Leftwrites experiment in progressive group blogging. A selection of these commentaries follows; they represent views of the Australian martial experience at radical odds with mainstream Australian histories. The issues raised are still relevant, especially as the Australian government is currently spending its way through millions of dollars as it prepares to commemorate/celebrate the centenary of the Gallipoli landing (2015). Leftwrites is archived in the Pandora web archive of the National Library of Australia.

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Radical Sydney began in June 2010 as a site devoted to the book by Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill titled 'Radical Sydney: Places, Portraits and Unruly Episodes', published by UNSW Press (2010). While this function continues, the blog has expanded as a platform for radical writing about history.

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"Martial Matters" by Rowan Cahill

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"Martial Matters" by Rowan Cahill

Between 2006–2009, Rowan Cahill published a number of commentaries relating to the Anzac tradition, and to the Australian martial tradition generally, on the *Leftwrites* experiment in progressive group blogging. A selection of these commentaries follows; they represent views of the Australian martial experience at radical odds with mainstream Australian histories. The issues raised are still relevant, especially as the Australian government is currently spending its way through millions of dollars as it prepares to commemorate/celebrate the centenary of the Gallipoli landing (2015). *Leftwrites* is [archived](#) in the Pandora web archive of the National Library of Australia.

Anzac Magic [posted 3 July 2006]

In an Anzac Day 2006 Opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Sydney Institute's Gerard Henderson was enthusiastic about the popularity of Anzac Day amongst Australians, particularly the young who are unwilling to embrace the prevailing leftist critique that their relatives died in vain fighting other peoples wars.

According to Henderson, despite efforts post-1945 by leftists and other denigrators dishing out self-proclaimed expert opinion and intellectualised cynicism, Anzac Day has become a popular celebration and representation of Australian values. What is more,

websites and blogs

Antiwar and Radical History
 Project-Pacific Northwest
 Bristol Radical History Group
 Capital & Class
 Center for the Study of Work,
 Labor and Democracy
 Center for Working Class Studies
 Civilisation and Authenticity
 Class and Struggle in Australia
 (Rick Kuhn, editor, 2004-05)
 Connexions Online
 Conversation with Howard Zinn
 Counterpunch
 Dave Renton's homepage
 Democracy Now!
 Edward Vallance
 Enabling Open Scholarship
 H-RADHIST Discussion Network
 Hackney Radical History
 Harry Bridges Center for Labor
 Studies
 Historians Against the War
 Historical Materialism
 Historical Materialism Australasia
 History is a Weapon
 History Workshop
 Holt Labor Library
 How to Make Trouble and Influence
 People
 howardzinn.org
 http://www.openscholarship.org/j
 cms/c_6226
 Hummer (Sydney ASSLH)
 Humphrey McQueen
 Illawarra Unity (Illawarra ASSLH)
 In These Times
 Interface: a journal for and about
 social movements
 Interference Archive
 International Association of Labour
 History Institutions (IALHI)
 International Institute of Social
 History
 International Socialism (journal)
 Jay's Radical History Links
 Journal for the Study of Radicalism
 Labor and Working-Class History
 Association
 Labor Studies Journal
 Labour History Links
 Left Flank
 Left Foot Forward
 Left History
 Left Turn
 Linebaugh on Paine
 Logos Journal
 London Socialist Historians Group
 Luddite Bicentenary
 Luddites at 200
 Manchester's Radical History
 Marcus Rediker
 Marxist Internet Archive
 Marxist Left Review
 Melbourne Branch (ASSLH)
 Midnight Notes Collective
 Monthly Review



(The Commonwealth Government is floating a further £10,000,000 for the War Chest. The prospectus calls upon investors to "show a patriotic spirit . . . especially as no count-ess is entailed . . . the rate of interest being far higher than in normal times.")

FAT (intoxicated with "patriotism"): "LONG LIVE THE WAR! HIP, HIP, 'OORAY! FILL 'EM UP AGAIN!"

this growth and popularity of Anzac Day has evolved organically from the bottom up; it has grown out of the Australian people.

This is a widely held idea, even amongst cultural analysts who regard themselves as leftists. Currently popular in academic and publishing circles is the notion that present day celebrations of Anzac Day, particularly pilgrimages by the young to Australian war-sites overseas, especially Gallipoli and the Kokoda Trail, is a national manifestation of the human cum spiritual desire to grieve and seek closure related to death, especially death in tragic circumstances, even by those not related or otherwise connected to the dead.

I see it otherwise. Anzac Day and the Anzac legend struggled to gain a hold on the Australian people post-World War 2; too many Australians had experienced the horrors of war first hand to somehow transcendently glorify and celebrate notions of sacrifice and duty, and too many were angry that the 1939-45 war against fascism and militarism had not brought about the new world of peace and social justice they had fought for. As a young activist in the anti-war movement of the 1960s, I met many former members

Neoliberalism, Development, and
 Aid Volunteering
 Network of Teacher Activist Groups
 New Left Review
 New Political Science
 New Words (Jeff Sparrow's blog)
 Northern Radical History Network
 Nottingham Radical History Group
 Occupy History
 Occupy Together
 Occupy Wall Street
 Online University of the Left
 Overland literary journal
 past tense
 PM Press
 Poetics of History From Below-
 Rediker
 Popular Radical History Books
 Protest History
 Protest! Archives from the
 University of Melbourne
 Radical America
 Radical Film and Photography:
 Bernadette Smith
 Radical Glebe-Ann Curthoys
 Radical History (UK blog)
 Radical History Network (RAHN)
 Radical History of Macquarie
 University
 Radical History Review
 Radical Newcastle
 Radical Politics & the University of
 Queensland
 Radical Politics Today
 Radical Reference
 Radical Tasmania
 Radical Times Historical Archive
 radicalhistory.net
 Raewyn Connell
 Rag-picking History
 Raymond Williams Foundation
 Reason in Revolt
 Recorder (Melbourne ASSLH)
 red pepper
 Review 31
 Review of Radical Political
 Economics
 Roar Magazine
 Rough Reds
 socialist history news
 Socialist History Society
 Solidarity Forever! (digital version
 of Bertha Walker's 1972 book on
 Percy Laidler)
 SPUNC (Small Press Underground
 Networking Community
 Takver's Radical Tradition
 The International Marxist-Humanist
 The Koori History Website
 The Magna Carta Manifesto
 the many-headed monster
 The Public Intellectual: Henry A
 Giroux
 The Sea-Green Society
 The Small Press Network
 The WTO History Project
 Tolpuddle Martyrs Museum
 Tom O'Lincoln's Red Sites
 TomDispatch

of the armed forces, some of them very highly decorated, in the anti-war ranks.

The Vietnam war era, including the domestic *HMAS Voyager* tragedy (1964), left Australia's defence forces with demoralising lows and accumulated debilitating legacies. Post-1972, they found themselves, particularly the army, without an enemy, and with major problems regarding strategy, organization, leadership, funding, morale, recruitment, equipment, all of these in a national cultural mood that was anti-war.

In response, political and defence strategists sought to create a new, confident, well financed military industry and martial mood. This entailed overcoming the negativities created by the Vietnam War, and shoring up and energising Australia's martial spirit. Which was not too difficult, given the martial spirit is a component of our national core; Australia began as a military outpost of Empire, spent a number of its formative early years ruled by a military junta, the NSW Corps, and has a long history of military involvements stretching from the land-grabbing participation in the Maori Wars during the 1860s (the troops were rewarded with grants of confiscated Maori land) to the present-day involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq, with the only real threat to the nation coming during World War 2.

The rebuilding, re-energising, process was helped along by lobbyists, an energetic international armaments industry, media savvy on the part of defence interests, and a legion of journalists, educators, historians who variously became part of the process; war/military history emerged as a bankable academic specialisation offering career paths. International terrorism played a part as well, particularly in the wake of the 1978 Hilton bombing (Sydney), increasingly providing the enemy and rationale the Cold War no longer could.

The achievement was the cultivation of an Australian warrior ethos, and the recasting of Anzac Day into a commemoration and remembrance of war as a generic phenomenon. Wars were set free from the encumbrances of specific historical and political contexts, and from the ways they were conducted, a process dulling the capacity of people to question and to think critically about wars, the reasons why they happen, and the morality of war itself. Generic war became a noble undertaking.

No Gerard, the present day popularity of Anzac Day has not magically and mystically emerged from below, out of the soul of the Australian people. It is the result of nearly thirty years of political and ideological grooming by defence and martial interests on both sides of the political spectrum, and has been imposed from above. It is about grooming the Australian people to bankroll an increasingly expensive military machine, to host the martial spirit, and to passively accept military adventurism like the war in Iraq.

Sadly it is also about grooming future generations of youth to answer the call to war, of seeding the future with the ancient pre-Christian idea that the sacrificial shedding of young, preferably male, blood is part of a natural cycle, ensuring growth and vigour, while holding out the promise the sacrificed become part of a transcendent glory higher than life itself. Small wonder our latest warlord, Brendan Nelson, wants to use the Anzac vehicle to teach Australian values in school. When it all boils down, there is a sense in which there are only a few degrees of difference between those

Union Songs
 Unofficial Histories
 Watermelon (Tony Harris blog)
 Wendy Bacon: Journalist and
 Activist
 Workers of the World (journal)
 Working Class Studies Association
 Z Communications
 Zinn Education Project

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who promote the Anzac legend, and the Islamic jihadists who groom youngsters to become suicide bombers.

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Martial Blindspot [posted 13 July 2006]

The Australian military tradition embraces more than is allowed by the secular religiosity surrounding the Anzac Legend and the Anzac Tradition. Since 1901 Australia's armed forces have variously been used domestically in peacetime, in a political way.

The armed forces were mobilised as back-up during the 1923 Melbourne Police Strike and also provided strike breaking assistance; troops were used as strike breakers during the 1949 Coal Strike in New South Wales; army and naval personnel were used to variously break bans by the Seamen's Union of Australia (SUA) and the Waterside Workers' Federation in 1951, 1952, 1953, and 1954; the navy was used to break an SUA boycott against the Vietnam War in 1967; the air force was used to break union bans on Qantas in 1981; the navy and air force were used to break the 1989 industrial campaign by the Australian Federation of Air Pilots. Also that year, the dispatch of troops was authorised to back-up South Australian police against demonstrators at the Nurrungar joint Australia-United States military satellite base.

A significant political-industrial role was envisaged for the army during the Cold War in the anti-union Operation Alien (1950-1953); armoured cars and troops were used to intimidate agitated unemployed Italian migrants at the Bonegilla reception camp in Victoria, 1952; the nature and extent of involvement of defence force personnel in the 1998 War on the Waterfront is yet to be fully understood.

And let's not forget the Fraser government's military occupation of the semi-rural town of Bowral, south of Sydney, during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting (CHOGRM) in 1978, following the mysterious Hilton Hotel bombing (Sydney), possibly the result of a botched black operation by Australia's security agencies. In response Prime Minister Fraser deployed domestically nearly 2000 troops to act against an unseen, unknown, never identified or described, possibly fictitious, alleged threat, occupying the town of Bowral for a couple of days during a CHOGRM rural retreat.

Long term, this unprecedented and controversial decision, along with the bombing, had significant ramifications. Security was placed firmly on Australia's national agenda and fundamentally changed the nation. The power of the federal government in domestic affairs was strengthened, terrorism became a specific legal entity, counter-terrorism became the preserve of the army, and eventually we got the Defence Legislation Amendment (Aid to Civilian Authorities) Act 2000, making it easier for the federal government to use the armed forces in peace-time on domestic soil against perceived threats to Commonwealth interests, and enabling the army to have police powers.

Lurking in the shadows of Australia's military tradition are the private quasi-military outfits that proliferated during the 1920s and

1930s. Some of these organisations were the Order of Silent Knights, the Blackshirts, the White Guard, the Old Guard, the New Guard, the League of National Security. Together, they had an estimated membership of 130,000.

These outfits had access to arms and ammunition, were disciplined, conspiratorial, well organised and financed, and had significant links with serving, often high ranking, military personnel.

Distrustful of democratic processes and conventions, hostile towards organised labour, these outfits waited in the wings for the industrial circumstances that would give them the opportunity to impose authoritarian solutions.

The last known of these outfits was The Association, led by Sir Thomas Blamey, Major General C.H. Simpson, and General Sir Leslie Morshead. Organised in 1947, it disbanded in the early 1950s, welcoming the strong anti-communist and anti-union policies of the newly elected Menzies government.

As I said at the beginning of this post, the Australian military tradition embraces more than is allowed by the secular religiosity surrounding the Anzac Legend and the Anzac Tradition.

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A Visit to the Dark Side [posted 22 July 2006]

It is timely given the furore over the death of [Private Kovco](#), and ongoing allegations of sexual harassment, bullying, misogyny, and mental cruelty in Australia's armed forces, to consider the dark side of Australian military history, a world away from the Anzac legend.

Terror and profiteering: Australia's military history began with colonisation. The European occupation of the continent did not go unchallenged by the Aborigines. A state of war existed from Governor Phillip's time, right through the nineteenth century, as the invaders met with Aboriginal resistance.

The defenders strategically employed guerilla-type warfare against the superior military might of industrial **Britain**. Because this resistance was effective, and the enemy elusive, a bloody and vengeful military campaign was conducted in retaliation. There were punitive raids on camps, and terror was officially used to bring about Aboriginal submission. This protracted warfare resulted in the violent deaths of an estimated 20,000 Aborigines and 2000 Europeans.

For twenty years between 1790 and 1810, **Britain** was preoccupied with conflict in **Europe**. The colonial outpost of **New South Wales** was turned over to a specially created infantry force, the NSW Corps. Recruited from adventurers, opportunists and **Britain's** military prisons, this outfit had a free hand. An officer clique used its weapons monopoly to self-advantage. The small non-convict population was cowed into submission, and the clique used thuggish corruption to generate huge personal fortunes, especially in land deals.

Before Federation in 1901, thousands of Australian volunteers participated in three imperialist military ventures: against the New Zealand Maori tribes (the Maori Wars,

1863–72); against the Islamic rebellion in the **Sudan** (1885–86); and against emerging Chinese nationalism during the Boxer Rebellion (1900–01). In each case the involvement was presented in adventurous, jingoistic terms, and the enemy portrayed as heathens devoid of human rights. This was a recipe for callous and criminal military behaviour. The 2600 Australian volunteers in the Maori Wars, who helped the British army subdue the Maori tribes defending their fertile tribal lands, were attracted across the Tasman with the promise of land grants from captured enemy territory.

Australia's emergence as a nation was marked by the involvement of 16,175 troops in the Boer War (1899–1902) in **South Africa**, on behalf of British gold interests. It was a brutal war in which the British used scorched earth tactics and concentration camps to crush the resistance of the Boers, who were the descendants of Dutch, German, and French immigrants.

In 1902 four Australian lieutenants were court-martialled, and two subsequently executed, by British military authorities following several incidents in which Boer prisoners were killed, and a German missionary murdered. The episode is mythologised in the 1980 film *Breaker Morant*. Arguably the officers were frustrated by the Boers' guerilla warfare and resorted to "vigilante justice" in retaliation, in much the same way Australian soldiers would in **Vietnam** 64 years later.

Mutiny and VD: Twelve years later, Australia was at war again. The Great War (1914–18) realised the dream of those Federationist polemicists who maintained that a nation should be born in the heat of battle and blood sacrifice. Out of the blood-fests of the Western Front, and the impossibilities of Gallipoli, the Anzac myth was crafted, telling of larrikin heroes imbued with mateship and derring-do.

Popular accounts of the war conveniently ignore uncomfortable bits and pieces: like the racism of Australian troops in the Middle East as they cleaned out the Turkish Empire to make way for European petroleum and strategic interests. The locals were referred to as "wogs"; the order to round up Bedouin tribesman, and execute those who resisted in any way or who acted suspiciously, was enthusiastically obeyed.

On the home front, in February 1916 the Liverpool Mutiny took place. Protesting against their camp working conditions, thousands of uniformed troops deserted their base on the outskirts of Sydney, commandeered trains, and took over Sydney for a riotous day of rampage and looting. Civilian and military authorities quelled the mutineers with rifle fire at Central Station. The alleged ring leader was killed, others wounded, eight seriously, and many others placed under arrest.

Venereal disease was a major problem amongst Australian troops during World War I. In the four months before the 1915 Gallipoli landing, 2000 of the proposed landing force were incapacitated by, and 3% constantly sick from, venereal infection. Prior to leaving Egypt for Gallipoli, the troops went to the Cairo brothel area they believed was the source of infection and burned the brothels; some of the buildings were eight storeys high. Prostitutes were injured and their personal belongings destroyed in retribution. Overall more than 10% of Australia's World War

I diggers contracted VD, one of the highest infection rates experienced by the warring nations.

After the end of World War I, Australian troops fought against the Red Army during 1919. They were part of the anti-Bolshevik North Russian Relief Force. Australians won two Victoria Crosses in this bloody and useless British initiative. The campaign aimed at advancing British interests in the Baltic region and in Persia. The force was withdrawn after British capitalists decided it would be better to develop trade links with the infant Soviet Russia.

Some Australian ex-servicemen found a market for their skills post-war. They were conspicuous amongst those who joined the notoriously brutal, internationally reviled "Black and Tans", the special British force used during the Irish struggle for independence in the early 1920s. This set an unacknowledged precedent, and ever since, Australian ex-service personnel have been conspicuous amongst the ranks of adventurist, mercenary outfits worldwide, including today's Iraq in the richly rewarded private security industry. Ironically, for a time during the post-1960s conflict between the IRA and the British army, there were reports of Australian Army weaponry finding its way into IRA hands, something never publicly explained, but possibly pointing to an international black market weapons trade within the ranks of the Australia's armed forces.

Desertion and treason: And so to World War II. In February 1942, Japanese aircraft attacked Darwin for the first time: eight ships were sunk, 243 people killed, and some 400 wounded. Early warnings were either misinterpreted or ignored; the RAAF had no operational aircraft in the area at the time. Australian troops defending the town panicked and fled in significant numbers; looting took place. The shameful episode was the subject of a Royal Commission.

When Japanese troops entered Singapore in 1942, Australian troops, facing defeat and capture, resorted to riotous behaviour. They looted, and fought for places on civilian evacuation craft. When asked what should be done to stop this behaviour, their commander, Major-General Bennett, said "Shoot them!" He then hightailed it out of Singapore with two staff officers and escaped to Australia. Two courts of inquiry subsequently found his desertion "unwise". Denied further significant leadership roles, Bennett resigned from the army in 1944.

In New Guinea the indigenous people were pressed into service by Australian troops to carry war supplies across rugged jungle terrain in the war against Japan. Nicknamed "fuzzy wuzzies", the locals were driven relentlessly. Legendary war photographer Damien Parer recorded that pneumonia and ruptured spleens were common amongst the porters, and that reluctance and exhaustion were treated with ruthless kicks to the ribs. The popular military version is that it was all a matter of selfless and willing cooperation by the locals.

After 1943, Adolf Hitler put together the British Free Corps, a brigade recruited from fascist-sympathising prisoners of war. It was mainly composed of troops from Canada, South Africa, and Australia. The outfit had its own distinct uniform, but saw little front-line action. After the war some of its prominent members were executed or imprisoned for treason by Allied authorities.

Vietnam Tragedies: Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War was drenched in racism. The nationalist enemy was characterised as "noggies" and "slant eyes". A 1968 survey of Australian, British, and US press reports of the war revealed that

Australian troops shot wounded prisoners, razed villages, and destroyed food stocks. Of the hundreds of prisoners captured to 1967, only 27 could actually be accounted for.

One Australian tactic was to turn prisoners over to either South Vietnamese or Korean allies. The Koreans had a reputation for barbaric treatment of Viet Cong prisoners; decapitation and genital mutilation were specialties. The commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Charlesworth, was quoted in 1967 saying, "The Koreans know just how to handle the Vietnamese ... we are tolerant to a sometimes absurd extent. These people are Asians". And he went on to explain how you don't get respect using "kid-glove techniques".

In 1968 the Australian public was shocked to hear how modern-day Anzacs went about business in Vietnam. One Australian officer was exposed as having used water torture against a female prisoner. This tactic was a form of torture by drowning; information was extracted by forcing water down a prisoner's throat.

As the Vietnam War dragged on, Australia's involvement was increasingly questioned. The relationship between Australian troops, many of them conscripts, and their officers and NCOs, became increasingly tense. Cases of soldiers attempting to kill their superiors were reported. It was not uncommon for those in command to add "please" to their orders.

Training conscripts for duty in Vietnam was not a kid-glove affair, either. Eventually the Australian press christened the Puckapunyal training camp in Victoria, "Suicide Camp", alleging bastardisation of recruits led to young men attempting suicide; a number of successful suicides occurred in the Kapooka Camp. Self-mutilation by cutting off the trigger finger was also a reported tactic by desperate young men caught up in an increasingly desperate system and war.

Something Australian military spin doctors and Anzac Day enthusiasts never point out is that during the Vietnam War, at least 13% of Australian deaths in Vietnam resulted from accidents and illness unconnected with battle and from battle accidents, as Australians accidentally killed their own mates, or as American artillery and aircraft fire accidentally took Australian lives.

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Great War, Good War [posted 20 September 2006]

The recent discovery in Belgium of what are thought to be the remains of five Great War Australian soldiers, is a reminder that it is almost a century since the beginning of World War 1.

Within the next decade Australians can expect a tsunami of books, journalism, television programmes, and political outpourings celebrating the event. With the emphasis on **celebration**. By then, everyone directly linked to the Great War will be well and truly dead, and direct memories of the obscene carnage and aftermath will rest

with the transformative powers of mythmakers, and war historians who seem to operate a whisper away from political patronage.

In recent years the Australian population has been gently coached away from the anti-war legacies of the 1960s into the embrace of the martial spirit. The Howard government has played no small part in this, but it is a process that commenced in the 1970s, was nourished later by the Keating government, and is now an essential cultural part of the Howard government's War Against Terror, and its policy of 'failed state' interventions.

Simply, if Australians generally are expected to bankroll huge military expenditures and tolerate the immense social and community costs, to support ever growing expensive and risky military ventures, and perhaps even support conscription further down the track, then they have to be softened up to view war, military service, and the martial spirit as integral, vital, normal parts of Australian life.

The tsunami, when it comes, will probably reflect the revisionism currently shaping the writing of WW1 history in Britain. Criticising this revisionism, socialist historian Neil Faulkner has recently identified its three main arguments: the generals were not out of their depth, at worst incompetent, but "competent commanders grappling with unprecedented and exceptionally difficult strategic and tactical problems"; the war was long, not because of leadership issues or politics, but because it was "unavoidably a 'war of attrition', and therefore a long struggle involving high casualties," a matter of what is seen as 'necessary sacrifice'; the war was a just war, essentially "a struggle between democratic states (Britain and France) and a 'rogue state' (Germany) that was militaristic, aggressive, expansionist, such that the 'balance of power' and 'world peace' were threatened".

In a recent *Quarterly Essay* (Issue 21, 2006) discussion of the Australian military tradition, John Birmingham stated that "a German victory in the Great War would have seen a very different, and much darker, history of the last century". An interesting "What If?" More interesting though is the question 'What if WW1 never occurred?', one which martial enthusiasts and future war-makers seldom raise or ponder.

As Faulkner explains, the German 'rogue state' idea dovetails with an idea gaining currency in rightist scholarship about Empires, that there are 'good' (progressive) empires and 'bad' empires, the former characterised by "parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, liberal

policies, and a desire to enlighten and improve", the latter having autocratic, repressive, ruthless governments and "no mission to advance the interests of their subjects". All of which dovetails with, and neatly helps endorse, the contemporary Bush mission to the world. As John Pilger, for one, pointed out in 2002, while the word imperialism has tended to drop from Western intellectual discourse, conservatives and liberals alike have embraced its euphemism, 'civilisation'.

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Fifth Columnist Spitters? [posted 25 March 2008]

In his recent 814 page history *Vietnam: The Australian War* (HarperCollins, 2007), journalist Paul Ham relates how Australian troops returning home from the front lines of Vietnam were variously spat on and called "baby killers" by anti-war protestors. To a significant extent, Ham's account relies on interviews he conducted with veterans in 2005/06. Journalist Ham seems to be of the opinion that former Australian anti-war activists owe veterans an apology; he notes that not one protestor has apologised for the abuse. At the same time he records the recollections of a few leading anti-war activists that, to their knowledge, the alleged abusive behaviour did not occur.

Momentarily Ham recognises a problem. On one hand he has veterans with memories of abuse; on the other, anti-war activists with no such memories. Rhetorically he asks, was the abuse the work of an "anonymous Fifth Column"? For journalist Ham, the abuse took place and was widespread. However, as an historian he should have seriously considered the possibility the abuse was/is mythical, part of a complex, essentially post-war, psychological and political process.

In 1994, historian Professor Ann Curthoys, a former anti-war activist, published her investigation of the Vietnam veteran story of rejection and abuse ("Vietnam: Public memory of an anti-war movement").*. According to her research, the 16 Australian infantry battalion tours of Vietnam were all given 'welcome home' marches, while the anti-war movement was "largely sympathetic to the plight of soldiers", regarding them as political "pawns" or as "victims".

There was one significant protest. In June 1966, a 21-year-old female typist from working class western Sydney, partially smeared in red paint, stood in front of a welcome home parade; her symbolic blood smeared some soldiers as they bumped into her. It was an individual and isolated act, not part of an organised protest. But according to Curthoys, this action and the dramatic front page Sydney *Sun* photograph capturing it, became entrenched in public memory as characterising the anti-war movement.

Curthoys' investigation established that accounts by veterans of anti-war hostility and abuse did not become public until the early 1980s. Subsequently these gained currency. By the early 1990s veterans recalled protestors with bitterness, and regarded the anti-war movement as having been a monolith (which it never was).

Conservative writers joined the fray. In 1985, for example, Frank Knopfelmacher described the Australian anti-Vietnam war movement as having been a "university-based Fifth Column"; three years later Gerard Henderson called on participants who had been involved in the movement to repent; the following year Greg Sheridan described the movement as having been "grossly wickedly immoral".

Explaining the demonisation of the anti-war movement by veterans, Curthoys points to the complex historical situation the troops found themselves embroiled in, not only in Vietnam, but back home as the Australian government lost its moral authority, and as public disenchantment with the war grew. Veterans, particularly conscripts, were cursorily discharged into a society increasingly uneasy "about the political and military commitment they represented".

As soldiers in Vietnam, veterans had been encouraged to do a job, to do their duty; ideology had little to do with the task on hand. Back home, however, the war increasingly had everything to do with politics, ideology and morality. According to Curthoys, veterans felt they "could not be remembered as Australian soldiers from previous wars were remembered". Instead of directing their emotional/psychological intensity against the government that embroiled them in Vietnam, anger was deflected to protestors and the anti-war movement.

American sociologist and Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke has written extensively on American Vietnam veterans' recollections of anti-war abuse, recollections that mirror those of Australian veterans. He is author of a significant study, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1998). According to Lembcke, stories about spat-on Vietnam veterans are bogus, rooted in the political and moral corruption of the Nixon administration and nourished by popular culture. The 1982 Sylvester Stallone movie *First Blood*, about renegade vigilante Vietnam veteran John Rambo, was particularly potent. Rambo described his experiences of coming home from Vietnam, of being spat-on and called "baby killer" by anti-war "maggots".

Indeed, as Lembcke points out, the myth of the spat-upon veteran is not new. Nazi leader Hermann Goering railed against "prostitutes", "young boys" (i.e. homosexuals) and "degenerates" who, he claimed, undermined the German war effort during World War 1 and had spat on the "field grey uniforms" of the nation's best front line soldiers. In reality the only Germans who could be accused of treating the uniform with disrespect were the thousands of mutinous soldiers and sailors who, in the closing stages of the war, tore off their military insignias, and, post-war, attempted to launch a socialist revolution. But this political reality did not suit the alternate history Goering wanted to establish.

Lembcke cites a 1971 Harris Poll commissioned by the US Veterans' Administration showing 94 per cent of Vietnam veterans reported "friendly homecomings", and points to abundant American historical evidence of "solidarity and mutuality between the anti-war movement and Vietnam veterans".

For Lembcke the spat-upon stories serve to discredit the American anti-war movement while obfuscating the political and military lessons to be learned from America's role in the Vietnam war. More recently, he has commented on the resurgence of the myth in the context of the war in Iraq, arguing it confuses public debate about

America's intervention, displacing debate about the politics of the war with "the phony issue of who supports the troops".

In Australia the spat-upon stories similarly discredit and demonise the Australian anti-war movement. Functioning as sleight of hand, they confuse the political and military lessons to be learned from Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war, allowing those who involved Australia to sidestep a general awareness of their criminality in the public memory. The stories help ensure future generations of young Australians will experience other and similar military involvements, and return from such encounters broken in many ways.

**Ann Curthoys, "'Vietnam': Public Memory of an Anti-War Movement", in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (editors), Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 113-134.*

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29 August 2012.



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